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# BEFORE ADAM



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We had learned how to cross a river, though we did not know it. And this was something that no one else of the folk had ever done. We were the first of the folk to set foot on the north bank of the river, and for that matter, I believe the last. That they would have done so in the time to come is undoubted, but the migration of the fire people and the consequent migration of the survivors of the folk set back our evolution for centuries. Indeed, there is no telling how disastrous was to be the outcome of the Fire People's migration. Personally I am prone to believe that it brought about the destruction of the folk; that we, a branch of lower life budding toward the human, were tipped short off and perished down by the roaring surf where the river entered the sea. Of course in such an eventuality, I remain to be accounted for, but I outrun my story, and such accounting will be made before I am done.

I have no idea how long Lop Ear and I wandered in the land north of the river. We were like mariners wrecked on a desert isle, so far as concerned the likelihood of our getting home again. We turned our back upon the river and for weeks and months adventured in that wilderness where there were no folk. It is very difficult for me to reconstruct our journeying and impossible to do it from day to day. Most of it is hazy and indistinct, though here and there I have vivid recollections of things that happened. Especially do I remember the hunger we endured on the mountains between Long lake and Far lake and the calf we caught sleeping in the thicket; also there are Tree People who dwell in the forest between Long lake and the mountains. It was they who chased us into the mountains and compelled us to travel on to Far lake.

First, after we left the river, we worked toward the west till we came to a small stream that flowed through marshlands. Here we turned away toward the north, skirting the marshes, and after several days arriving at what I have called Long lake. We spent some time around its upper end, where we found food in plenty, and then one day in the forest we ran foul of the Tree People. These creatures were ferocious apes, nothing more. And yet they were not so different from us: They were more hairy, it is true; their legs were a trifle more twisted and gnarly, their eyes a bit smaller, their necks a bit thicker and shorter and their nostrils slightly more like orifices in a sunken surface, but they had no hair on their faces and on the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet, and they made sounds similar to ours with somewhat similar meanings. After all, the Tree People and the folk were not so unlike.

I found him first, a little withered, dried up old fellow, wrinkled faced and beary eyed and tottery. He was legitimate prey. In our world there was no sympathy between the kinds, and he was not our kind. He was a tree man, and he was very old. He was sitting at the foot of a tree—evidently his tree, for we could see the tattered atree in the branches in which he slept at night.

I pointed him out to Lop Ear, and we made a rush for him. He started to climb, but was too slow. I caught him by the leg and dragged him back. Then we had fun. We pinched him, pulled his hair, tweaked his ears and poked twigs into him, and all the while we laughed with streaming eyes. His futile anger was most absurd. He was a comical sight, striving to fan into flame the cold ashes of his youth, to resurrect his strength dead and gone through the oozing of the years—making woeeful faces in place of the ferocious ones he intended, grinding his worn teeth together, beating his meager chest with feeble fists.

Also he had a cough and he gasped and hacked and spluttered prodigiously. Every time he tried to climb the tree we pulled him back until at last he surrendered to his weakness and did no more than sit and weep. And Lop Ear and I sat with him, our arms around each other, and laughed at his wretchedness.

From weeping he went to whining and from whining to wailing until at last he achieved a scream. This alarmed us, but the more we tried to make him cease the louder he screamed. And then from not far away in the forest came a "Goek! Goek!" to our ears. To this there were answering cries, several of them, and from very far off we could hear a big bass "Goek!" "Goek! Goek!" Also the "Whooh-whooh!" call was rising in the forest all around us.

Then came the chase. It seemed it never would end. They raced us through the trees, the whole tribe of them, and nearly caught us. We were forced to take to the ground, and here we had the advantage, for they were truly the Tree People, and while they outclimbed us, we outfought them on the ground. We broke away toward the north, the tribe howling on our track. Across the open spaces we gained and in the brush they caught up with us, and more than once it was nip and tuck. And as the chase continued we realized that we were not their kind either and that the bonds between us were anything but sympathetic.

They ran us for hours. The forest seemed interminable. We kept to the glades as much as possible, but they always ended in more thick forest. Sometimes we thought we had escaped and sat down to rest, but always, before we could recover our breath,

had lost his grip on the incubate thought. This was followed by the plaintive, querulous expression as the idea persisted and he clutched it anew. He looked at me and at the river and the far shore. He tried to speak, but had no sounds with which to express the idea. The result was a gibberish that made me laugh. This angered him, and he grabbed me suddenly and threw me on my back. Of course we fought, and in the end I chased him up a tree, where he secured a long branch and poked me every time I tried to get at him.

And the idea had gone glimmering I did not know, and he had forgotten. But the next morning it awoke in him again. Perhaps it was the homing instinct in him asserting itself that made the idea persist. At any rate it was there and clearer than before. He led me down to the water, where a log had grounded in the eddy. I thought he was minded to play, as we had played in the mouth of the slough. Nor did I change my mind as I watched him tow up a second log from farther down the shore.

(To be Continued Monday)



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